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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001469

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT  
DOD/OSD FOR USDP EDELMAN, ASD MBLONG

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: FORMER DEPUTY SPEAKER TELLS NEA DAS HALE  
U.S. SHOULD FOCUS ON TERRORISM, NOT ELECTIONS

REF: BEIRUT 727

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) Former Deputy Speaker of Parliament Elie Ferzeli told visiting NEA DAS David Hale on October 5 that creating solidarity among the Lebanese people was the most important challenge currently facing Lebanon. To achieve that goal, Ferzeli suggested that fighting fundamentalist terrorism in all forms in Lebanon should be the aim of U.S. policy in Lebanon, rather than focusing on the outcome of the 2009 parliamentary elections. While Ferzeli said he does not support Syria's return to Lebanon, he asserted that the Syrians could play a constructive role in alleviating some of Lebanon's problems, if given the space to do so. Furthermore, he was pessimistic about the ability of the Lebanese Armed Forces to continue to successfully perform its duties, as it did in 2007 in Nahr al-Barid, without obtaining appropriate weapons. End summary.

TERRORISM IS THE MAIN PROBLEM

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12. (C) Former Deputy Speaker of Parliament (1992-2005) Elie Ferzeli, an Orthodox Christian politician from West Bekaa, told visiting NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale and the Ambassador on October 5 that the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 failed to disarm Hizballah and failed to create Lebanese solidarity. In a meeting at his home in the Hazmieh suburb of Beirut, Ferzeli insisted that "fundamentalist terrorism" increased during the last three years and predicted it would only continue until there was trust in the Lebanese state and its institutions. He perceived the U.S. was more concerned with the spring 2009 parliamentary elections, than fighting terrorism in Lebanon. If the U.S. does not fight terrorism in Lebanon, he said, "you will fail." DAS Hale assured Ferzeli that the U.S. was equally concerned about improving and maintaining the functionality of Lebanon's institutions, including Lebanon's ability to deal with terrorist incidents within its borders.

13. (C) Ferzeli was quick to classify both (Sunni) Salafist groups in north Lebanon and (Shia) Hizballah as contributing to the increased threat of terrorism. The recent calls for

reconciliation between various Lebanese sectarian groups was a positive step, Ferzeli said, but cautioned that removing the ideological reasons for Hizballah to maintain its weapons was the key to achieving Lebanese solidarity. Unfortunately, he said, fundamentalist problems in Lebanon cannot be separated from fundamentalism in Iraq, or the Palestinian territories, or Syria, calling it "all the same land." On regional terrorism, DAS Hale suggested that Saudi Arabia had made strides in containing its problems with terrorism within its borders, but Ferzeli refuted the argument by saying, the Saudis "are paying money to solve this problem. They did not contain it or succeed in containing it. They are paying money to send fighters to other countries."

"SYRIQS MUST PLAY A ROLE"  
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14. (C) In a recurring theme, Ferzeli believed the Syrians could play a constructive role to eliminate or alleviate some of Lebanon's problems, including the threat of terrorism and diminishing support for Hizballah to retain its weapons. He called Syrian-Israeli indirect talks useful for Lebanon, and said these should be followed by negotiations between Lebanon and Israel to resolve problems in the south. Good relations with Syria, he said, are in Lebanon's interests and should be pushed. He was not advocating for a Syrian return to Lebanon, he said, and believed that Lebanon should maintain its independence.

15. (C) According to Ferzeli, Syria could also play a useful role in diminishing Iranian influence in Lebanon. The

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upcoming parliamentary elections will show that fifty percent of the Lebanese population is influenced by Iran through the money it is offering, while the other fifty percent would be influenced by Saudi Arabia, for the same reason, he said. The Syrians, in his view, do not share the same interests as Iran and Saudi Arabia. If progress is made in talks between the Syrians and Israelis, Ferzeli surmised, then Hizballah's stature is reduced, and by extension, Iran's influence. Ferzeli accused the U.S. of preventing Syria from pursuing its initiatives for peace and urged the U.S. to give Syria the space to do so.

16. (C) DAS Hale countered Ferzeli's assessment of U.S. policy towards Syria by reiterating that although the U.S. maintains only limited talks with Syria, the U.S. is supportive of Israeli-Syrian talks. However, DAS Hale maintained that Syria also must show concrete evidence that it is serious about improved relations with the West and with moderate Arab states. Until now, the U.S. is not persuaded, Hale said. Furthermore, while the U.S. supports improved relations based on mutual respect between Lebanon and Syria, he said, the U.S. does not support foreign intervention of any kind in Lebanon. DAS Hale called Syria's statement that it might need to intervene in Tripoli after the October 1 bombing that targeted the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) "of concern," and said, contrary to Ferzeli, he was not convinced that Syria was not also stoking some of the problems.

SKEPTICAL OF LAF CAPABILITY  
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17. (C) Returning to his concerns about terrorism, Ferzeli assessed that the only way to stop fundamentalist ideology from spreading was to stop it militarily. However, he said, the LAF cannot endure another battle and sustain the losses of its soldiers like it did in Nahr al-Barid in 2007, despite the LAF's success at the time. Ferzeli was skeptical that new U.S. military assistance would be sufficient enough to substantially improve the LAF's capabilities to fight such a battle. The U.S., he claimed, would not provide arms to the LAF, saying the U.S. had maintained the same policy for 50 years.

¶8. (C) DAS Hale told Ferzeli that U.S. strategy towards the LAF and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) had, in fact, changed. Hale said that the new equipment and training assistance the U.S. will provide begins at the level of the ground forces, and may take time to show results after 20 years of Syrian influence over the LAF. However, the U.S. is committed to bolstering the LAF and ISF as essential Lebanese institutions, Hale continued. In addition, the launching on October 6 of the Joint Military Commission (JMC) between the U.S. and Lebanon is a reflection of the U.S. commitment and partnership. The Ambassador commented that the ISF improved its community policing program, through U.S. assistance, in Nahr al-Barid and will eventually expand to all 12 Palestinian camps. The ISF, she emphasized, is graduating 300 newly trained recruits every ten weeks and thus expanding its capacity to deal with the challenges.

COMMENT

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¶9. (C) Ferzeli kept to virtually the same issues he raised with the Ambassador in May (reftel). However, he expressed a palpable, new desire for Syria to play a role in assisting Lebanon solve its problems. Ferzeli said he plans to run for a parliamentary seat in the 2009 elections. It is not clear who his financial backers are for his campaign, but he appeared concerned that the electoral law passed September 27 did not seriously address his campaign finance concerns.

¶10. DAS Hale has cleared this message.

SISON